

Demonology in South and Southeast Asian Sculptural Art



Editors

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Frontispiece: Ravana on *Pushpakavimana*, Kadavallur Srirama temple, Kerala
Back Cover: Ravana riding a mythical bird, Indonesia (Courtesy: Asian Art Museum)

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***Hiraṇyakaśipu*- the Usurper of the Three Worlds: A Study of His Mythology and Artistic Representations**

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Abstract

The narrative of the demon Hiraṇyakaśipu is found throughout India popularly associated with the myth of Narasiṃha. He is regarded as the one who incurs the wrath of lord Viṣṇu for usurping the three worlds and inverting the balance of things to his whims and fancies. After being mentioned for the first time in the *Śānti-parva* of the *Mahābhārata*, his narrative increases in complexity and with changing agendas as evidenced by his subsequent puranic compilations. Artists throughout India have been portraying the detailed story of his greed and lust for power while showcasing in parallel the trials and tribulations faced by his son Prahlāda due to his utmost devotion to Viṣṇu. The present study analyses the sculptural depictions of *Hiraṇyakaśipu* found adorning the walls and pillars of Hindu temples throughout the country to evaluate the evolution of his narrative and the manner in which his depictions are shaped.

Keywords: Hiraṇyakaśipu, Narasiṃha, Mahābhārata, Sculptural depictions

Introductions

The narrative of the demon Hiraṇyakaśipu is found throughout India popularly associated with the myth of Narasiṃha. He is regarded as the one who incurs the wrath of lord Viṣṇu for usurping the three worlds and inverting the balance of things to his whims and fancies. After being mentioned for the first time in the *Śānti-parva* of the *Mahābhārata*, his narrative increases in complexity and with changing agendas, as evidenced by his subsequent puranic compilations (Vemsani, 2017). Artists throughout India have been portraying the detailed story of his greed and lust for power while showcasing in parallel the trials and tribulations faced by his son Prahlāda due to his utmost devotion to Viṣṇu. This contrast between the father and son, between devotion and destruction, is what drives the story of Hiraṇyakaśipu into the minds of the larger audience.

The Story

The account of Hiraṇyakaśipu as a nefarious demon is primarily seen in the 18 *Mahāpurāṇas*. Despite varying in a few minor details, all the *Purāṇas* contain the same account of the rise and fall of Hiraṇyakaśipu caused by his own actions (Jaiswal, 1973). Though this paper will mainly concentrate on sculptures, a few Paintings from the 18th century and Hoysala stone carvings from the 12th century are provided to act as visual models for the narration of the story and to get a more immersive view into how artists used depictions for their storytelling.

It all begins when the demon king Hiranyakaśipu practices severe austerities without consumption of any kind of food, sustaining himself only on the air that he breathes (*Narasimha Purāṇa*, 40.1-4). He stands for 10,000 years with his toes on the ground, keeping his arms upward and looking towards the sky. The spot where he stood, even after being covered by an anthill, grass and bamboo sticks, did not seem to disturb his austerity, which could now be felt by the heavens (*Bhāgavata Purāṇa*, 7.3.15-16). Pleased by his action, Lord *Brahmā* offered him to grant whatever he wished for (Figure 1).



Figure 1. The Granting of a Boon by Brahmā (PC: Royal Collection Trust)

Hiranyakaśipu wished Brahmā to grant him exemption from death from gods, *Gandharvas*, demons, human beings, animals, insects, snakes, and reptiles. He wished not to be cursed by sages or killed by any weapons, neither wet nor dry, and if the unfortunate event of his death were to occur, it should neither be inside nor outside and neither be day nor night and if anyone were at all able to kill him, it should be achieved by one stroke of the hand (*Harivamśa Purāṇa* 41; *Brahmā Purāṇa* 213.44-79; *Viṣṇudharmottarapurāṇa* 1.54). Not being satisfied even with this, the demon then wished to encompass the universe, to be the sun, moon, wind, fire, water, and air, as well as to become the guardians of the four regions of the world (*Matsyapurāṇa* 161-163). Brahmā, hearing all this, declares, "Let it be so". Hiranyakaśipu, not wasting any time, wages war on the heavens and dethrones Indra himself (*Padma Purāṇa* VI.238.6-14). Calling upon

all the creatures of the earth and the nether realms, he then declares himself as the only king of the three worlds and orders all creatures to immediately abandon activities of worship made for the gods, including offering, donations and arranging holy sacrifices (*Narasimha Purāṇa* 40.16-22). He then proceeds to wreak havoc and spread fear while demanding all creatures to worship him alone as the one supreme lord in existence (Figure 2).



Figure 2. The Demons Creating Havoc (PC: Royal Collection Trust)

The terrible demon begets a son named Prahlaḍa, who was an ever-devout worshipper of Lord Viṣṇu from childhood. His father calls him one day and boastfully tells his son of the duties he must perform and the enemies he must slay in order to inherit and control the three worlds. However, to Hiraṇyakaśipu's dismay, Prahlaḍa refutes him, saying there was no meaning in material possessions and life without the presence of Viṣṇu. Becoming enraged with the mere thought of being lesser in the eyes of his son, even after possessing whatever there is in the universe, Hiraṇyakaśipu, without any compassion, orders his son to be tortured and killed.

The demons in his court first tried to attack Prahlaḍa with all their weapons but were surprised when the armaments turned into lotus petals when they touched *Prahlaḍa's* body (Figure 3). Then Hiraṇyakaśipu ordered snake charmers to release the most venomous snakes they had on Prahlaḍa, but when those creatures went near him, their

fangs fell off (*Narasimha Purāṇa*, 43.20-32). Next, the demon king intoxicated elephants to trample his son, but when those mighty animals approached him, their tusks fell off, and the elephants fell flat to the ground. Hiraṇyakaśipu even tried setting fire to Prahlāda but was astonished to see him unscathed by the heat (*Padma Purāṇa* (VI.238.60-72)).



Figure 3. Prahlāda Stone Carvings from the Hoysala period (courtesy: Preeta Nayar)

Hiraṇyakaśipu became furious, realising that whatever boons he had gained from his severe austerity, Prahlāda was seen to be emulating just by invoking the name of Viṣṇu in his lips. The demon king then challenged his son to prove the omnipresence of Viṣṇu by kicking a stone pillar inside his palace and boastfully asking, “Is your Viṣṇu in this pillar?”. Hiraṇyakaśipu was suddenly blinded by a white light emerging from the pillar and became stunned to see a half-man, half-lion creature roaring at him. Shaking off his initial surprise and realising it to be Viṣṇu, he charged the creature with his sword, but in a matter of seconds, he was overpowered by this man-lion or Narasimha (Figure 4).

He found himself balanced on the thighs of this creature standing on the threshold of his palace in twilight. The creature then used its ‘neither wet nor dry’ nails as a weapon to pierce open his heart, instantly killing the demon. Not satisfied with this alone, the man-lion

furiously pulled out Hiranyakaśipu's intestines to wear them around his neck as garlands. Prahlāda, then singing praise and hymns of adoration, calms down *Narasimha* to make him revert to his original form of Viṣṇu, getting praises and blessings from all the gods in return (*Bhāgavata Purāṇa*, 8.20-25). It is interesting to note that all of Hiranyakaśipu's devious actions are mentioned in length with many details, but when it comes to his death in the hands of *Narasimha*, it gets over in a matter of minutes, showing the immense power *Viṣṇu* has against anyone who wishes to challenge him.

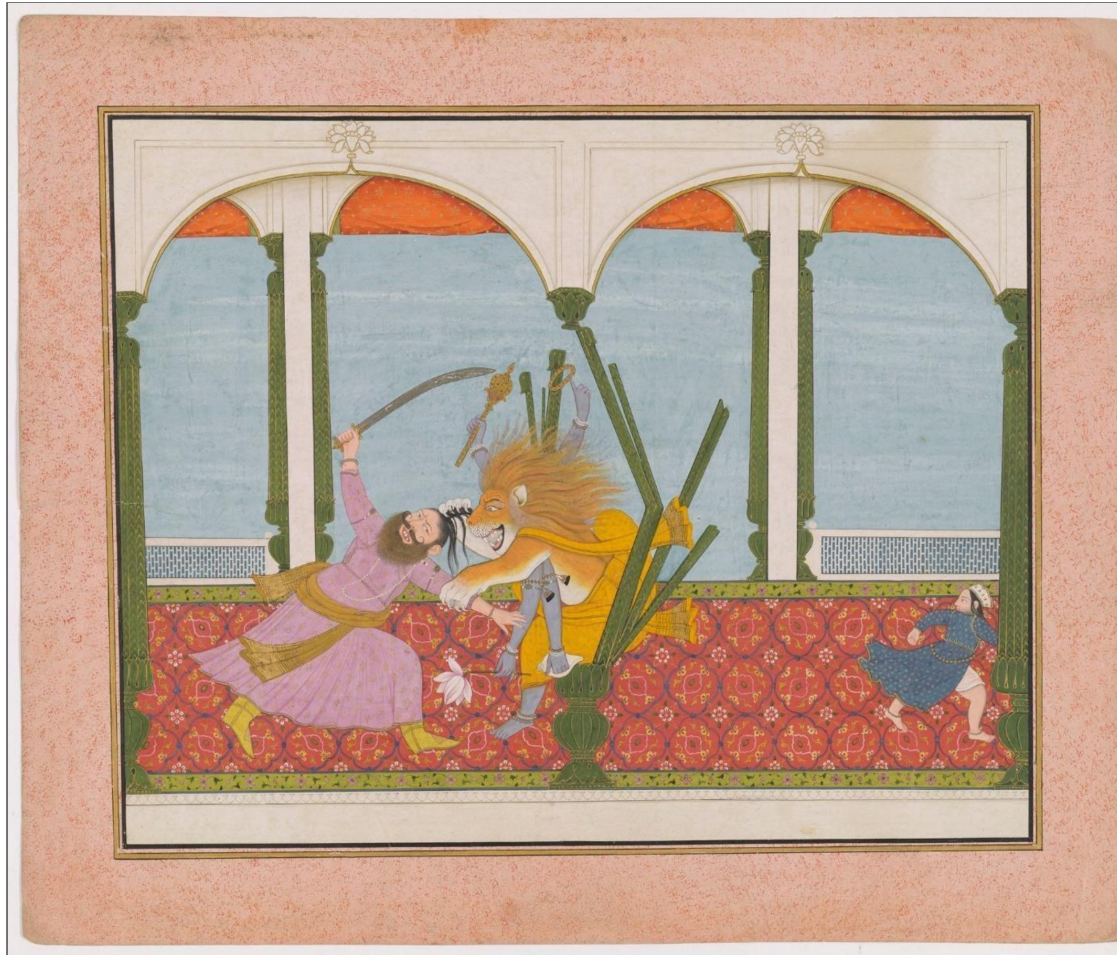


Figure 4. *Narasimha Attacks the Demon King* (PC: Royal Collection Trust)

Sculptures

The image (Figure 5) of *Narasimha* disembowelling *Hiranyakaśipu* from Mathura, currently housed in the Philadelphia Museum of Art, is the earliest of its kind, dating back to the 3rd-4th century CE. The sculpture made of spotted sandstone shows both the man-lion and the demon clad in simple clothing, with *Hiranyakaśipu* depicted as being almost in a foetal-like position, having a moustache, a simple necklace and long wavy hair on his head. The left arm in the upper half of his body seems to be broken, and the lower half of his body seems to be draped with a garment extending to his ankles and depicted

with folds. Interestingly, his face does not reflect the intense pain that he is going through but only holds a smile seeing Narasiṃha with his last breath.

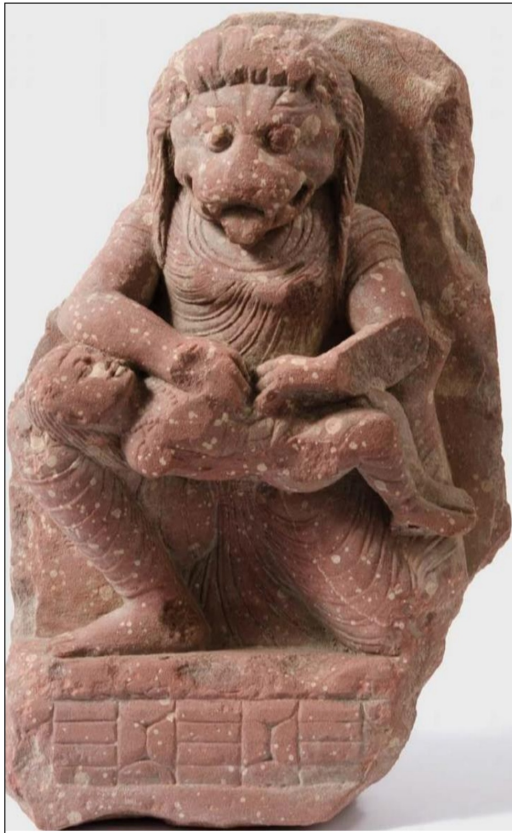


Figure 5. A Sandstone image from Mathura 3rd-4th Century CE (courtesy: John S. Guy)



Figure 6. A stone Image from the 5th Century CE (courtesy: ACSAA Collection)

The stone image (Figure 6) of Narasiṃha and Hiranyakaśipu, dated to the 5th century CE, shows the demon in a final struggle for his life from the clutches of the Man-lion. Only the upper half of this sculpture survives, showing Hiranyakaśipu two-handed. The depiction of earrings has not been seen in the previous centuries. His eyes are wide open, and his mouth is ajar, almost as if trying to let out a scream using his last breath. The demon is depicted with a top knot on his head, which Narasiṃha firmly holds while he tries to rip off the demon's heart.

The stone image (Figure 7) from Kashmir, dated to the 6th- 7th century CE and currently on display in the Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, showcases the fierce fighting of Narasiṃha and Hiranyakaśipu. The demon king is seen tightly bound by Narasiṃha, who grabs the demon's left arm while pressing the right leg with his feet. Hiranyakaśipu is depicted as looking at the Man-lion with astonishment while wearing a turban, circular earrings and a necklace. The lower half and the top left portion of the head of Hiranyakaśipu seem to be broken.



Figure 7. A Stone Image of the 6th-7th Century CE from Kashmir (courtesy: The Metropolitan Museum of Art)



Figure 8. An 8th Century CE Stone Sculpture from Rajasthan (courtesy: Michael W. Meister)

Another image of Narasimha (Figure 8), killing *Hiranyakaśipu*, is from the Harihara temple no.1, Rajasthan and is stylistically dated to the 8th century CE. The demon is evenly balanced on the knees of Narasimha, who proceeds to tear out the stomach of the demon to remove the intestines, showcasing a very gory death. Interestingly, there seems to be a figure prostrating at the bottom right corner, on whom Narasimha seems to balance his right leg. This figure should, according to legend, be Prahlāda, who is shown almost surrendering himself in devotion to his Lord. *Hiranyakaśipu* is seen ornamented with a pair of circular earrings and a necklace while sporting long flowing hair. The faces of all three figures and the side profile of *Hiranyakaśipu* seem to be damaged.

The image (Figure 9) from Cave 15 in Ellora, dated to the 8th century of the Rashtrakuta period, is an excellent example for showcasing the dynamism of the duel that occurred between Narasimha and *Hiranyakaśipu*. This sculpture is a very picturesque shot of the initial reactions of the demon king when he first laid eyes on the Man-lion creature. *Hiranyakaśipu* is seen trying to swing his right hand to use his sword to attack Narasimha, who proceeds to make the demon lose his balance by interlocking his legs with him and by pushing away the demon's head using one of his right arms and attempting to grab his shoulders. *Hiranyakaśipu* is given a previously unseen amount of detailing with the presence of armlets, bracelets, circular earrings, a waistband, and a necklace-- all beautifying the demon to show the material wealth he possessed. The crown that *Hiranyakaśipu* wears seems to be as ornate as the one worn by Narasimha. Both the figures are damaged from their waist down. The physical features of *Hiranyakaśipu* are accentuated with a prominent neck and a longer torso. His lower garment shows the presence of a girdle clasped with a lion motif.



Figure 9. An 8th Century CE Stone Image from Maharashtra (courtesy: ACSAA Collection)

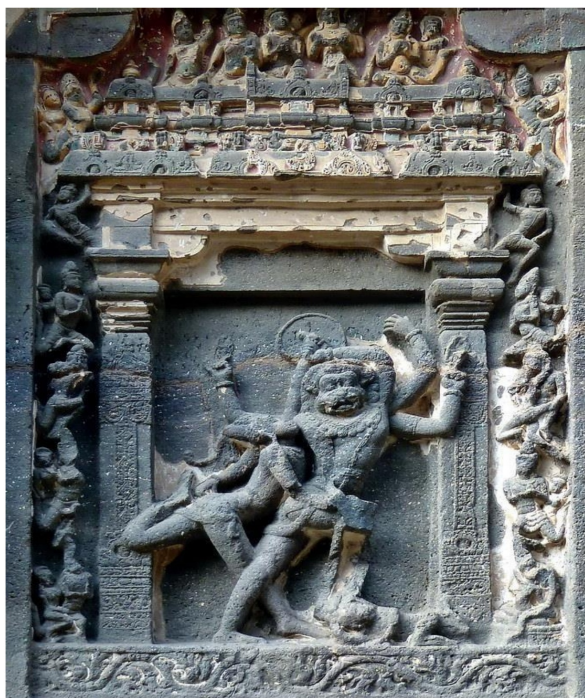


Figure 10. An 8th Century CE Stone Image from Maharashtra (courtesy: Manfred Sommer)



Figure 11. An 8th Century CE Stone Image from Karnataka (courtesy: Mary Binney Wheeler Image Collection)



Figure 12. An 8th Century CE Stone Image from Tamil Nadu (courtesy: John S. Guy)

The image (Figure 10) from Cave no. 16 in Ellora is also dated to the 8th century CE of the Rashtrakuta period, showing Hiraṇyakaśipu physically charging and grappling Narasiṃha, a motif not seen elsewhere. The demon's left leg is in the air, displaying a sense of motion, and Narasiṃha balances himself on the prostrating figure next to him. It is unclear whether the figure is another demon or Prahlāda himself due to the damage sustained by this entire carving. The head of Hiraṇyakaśipu also seems to be missing. All three figures are shown to be standing on the threshold of a building structure with celestial beings surrounding them, depicted as if eagerly seeing who triumphs in the fight.

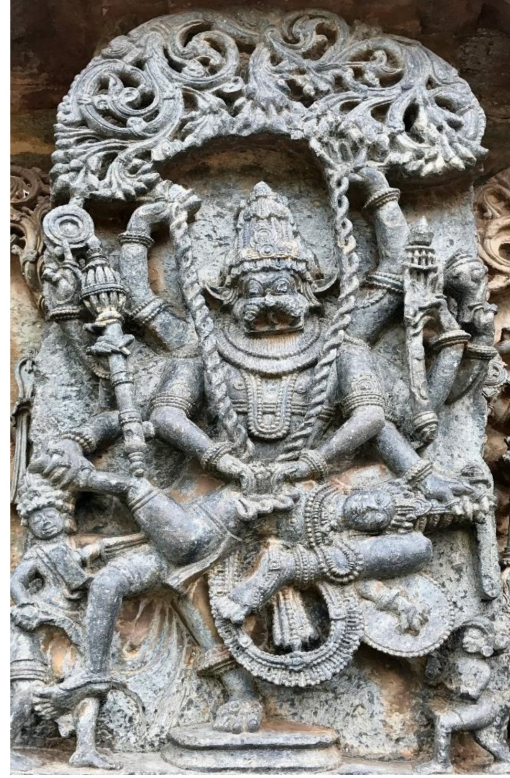
The sculpture (Figure 11) from Pattadakal, dated to the 8th century CE from the Chalukya period, shows Hiranyankashipu being caught by surprise when Narasiṃha locks onto him from behind with three of his four hands. The demon king is portrayed helplessly trying to unsheathe the sword in his right hand and defend himself with the shield held in his left hand but it seems to be too late. The demon is shown with a high crown and jutting locks of hair, along with a necklace, a sacred thread, a waistband and a profusely draped lower garment. Narasiṃha, portrayed trying to match the leg movement of Hiraṇyakaśipu, gives an almost rhythmic character to the scene. Both the figures standing in between the two pillars make the sculpture emulate the motion of Hiraṇyakaśipu being pushed out by Narasiṃha to the thresholds of the demon's palace moments before killing him.

The portrayal (Figure 12) from Namakkal, dated to the 8th century Pallava period, shows the demon Hiraṇyakaśipu nearing the end of his life. Narasiṃha here is shown plunging his hands inside the demon's abdomen while completely balancing him using his hands as the demon helplessly falls to the ground, still clenching his weapons. Hiraṇyakaśipu is depicted with a short crown, earring, armbands, bracelets, a thick sacred rope and a tightly fitted lower garment. The entire scene emulates an energetic sequence, as perfectly mentioned in the Puranic texts.

The image (Figure 13), dated to the 9th century and currently on display in the Allahabad Museum, shows Hiraṇyakaśipu being killed by *Narasiṃha*, whose hands are seen tearing open the demon king. The hands and legs of the demon are broken, but there seem to be traces of a fist holding the hilt of the sword, almost trying to strike the Man-lion before he gets the benefit of the kill. Hiraṇyakaśipu is seen with an elaborate hairdo, drooping ears with circular earrings, a necklace and a short lower garment adorning his body. His eyes are wide open, and he stares at Narasiṃha with a gleeful smile as if accepting his defeat in a demonic way.



Figure 13. A 9th Century CE Stone image from Uttar Pradesh (courtesy: Allahabad Museum)



Figures 14 & 15. Stone Images from Hoysaleswara temple, Karnataka, 12th Century CE (courtesy: Artstor Slide Gallery)



Figures 16a&b. Separated Images of Hiranyakaśipu from Figures 14 & 15 (courtesy: Yogesh Kumar)

These two images (Figures 14 and 15) are shown as the before and after sequence of the final battle between Narasimha and Hiranyakaśipu from the Hoysaleswara temple in Halebidu dated to the 12th century CE. In both images, the demon king is perfectly balanced between Narasimha's legs, and we can see him holding a shield with his right hand, fighting till the bitter end. In the image to the right, Narasimha pulls Hiranyakaśipu's entrails, which are depicted almost garland-like with the Man-lion in order to appreciate the intricate depictions of ornaments on these two Hoysala sculptures, they must be viewed separately. In figures 16a&b, one can see the demon with bulging eyes, wearing a crown, circular earrings, a bejewelled necklace and anklets. The waist girdle with festoons can be seen in the image on the left and a lower garment with pleats is visible in the image on the right.



Figures 18&19. Terracotta images from West Bengal, 18th Century CE (PC: A K Chatterjee)

The above two unique terracotta images (Figures 18 & 19) are from the Charbangla temple and the Madanmohan temple, respectively, in West Bengal, both dated to the 18th century CE. In both images, the demon king lies in a splayed manner, with the image on the left showing him with long hair and the image on the right showing him with a cap-like feature on his head. In both depictions, the demon is portrayed to be dead with no underlying motion, and we see Prahlaḍa in the image to the right depicted like a small boy seen singing the praise of Viṣṇu to calm down the Man-lion creature.

Correlation between the Sculptures and the Recorded Mythology

The depiction of Hiranyakaśipu can be seen throughout the Indian Subcontinent but can only be seen along with the figure of Narasiṃha and never alone. From the earliest times, Hiranyakashipu in sculptures has only been shown with two arms, similar to his portrayal in mythology as a demon and never a divinity. All his depictions till the 8th century CE show him clad in simple clothes and ornaments, but this has changed more evidently since then. The depictions of the scenes of battle between the demon king and Narasiṃha seem to be more prominent in southern parts of India than in the northern parts.

The reason why there is no depiction of *Prahlaḍa* in the sculptures before the 8th Century CE can be correlated to the accounts of Hiranyakaśipu's story in the *Harivamsa Purana*

and *Kūrmapurāṇa*, which are thought to be the earlier versions of his myth (Guy, 2016). Prahlaḍa is not shown as an ardent devotee of Viṣṇu in them but as someone who fought Narasiṃha along with his father but surrenders when he understands the power of God Viṣṇu. So, the images with a prostrating figure in the panels depicting Narasiṃha and Hiranyakaśipu in a duel can be the version of Prahlaḍa who surrendered to Narasiṃha rather than being a devout worshipper whom God rescued from the clutches of his father.

Conclusion

The reason for Hiranyakaśipu's demise can be considered in two different ways. In the early versions of his puranic accounts, as in the *Harivamsa* and *Kūrmapurāṇa*, he usurps control of the three worlds to himself and makes sure all the benefits of Vedic sacrifices done by anyone on earth should be enjoyed by him alone, making his actions invert the order of things in the world and since Viṣṇu is considered as the preserver of life and normality among the trinity he comes and destroys Hiranyakaśipu to revert things as it were (Vemasani, 2016). However, after the advent of Bhakti devotionism towards Viṣṇu, as seen in the *Bhagavatha* and *Narasiṃha Purāṇa*, Hiranyakaśipu gets destroyed mainly due to himself as being a non-believer and a hindrance in the worship of Viṣṇu by all the creatures of the world and mainly by his son Prahlaḍa (Meister, 1996).

The story of Hiranyakaśipu is loaded with a moral: 'It is that evil is not something you are born to be, but only through evil actions do you become greedy and sinful, straying away from what is right'. Hiranyakaśipu was never satisfied with what he had. Even after possessing near immortality, he always strived to take away what others had, never being content with who he was. In his lust for power, he tries to put to death his own son when he begins to question his morality and attempts to bring him back to the right path.

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